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ABSTRACT

Television's role within the familial setting is the subject of a research program being conducted at the Universities of Hartford, Texas, and Utah, proceeding on the premise that television functions within a variety of environmental influences, all of which act in varying combinations to produce a wide range of effects within viewers. The approach combines the inductive models of ethnology and the deductive models of hypothetical studies, and is directed toward two goals: the development of a library of case studies relating the process of television use within the family setting, and the interrogation of these for communalities and covering statements which can be predictive of certain classes of outcomes of viewing by individuals. Major classes of variables to be studied include normative and baseline data on television within the family structure, television as an agent of consumer socialization, and television's role in affecting family members' values. The following outcome descriptions have been established: the circumstances of television use by individual family members; the functions of television within the family structure; the motives, purposes and consequences of television viewing; and television as an agent of consumer socialization. (DF)

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An Ethnological Approach to a Study of Televiewing in Family Settings

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For more than 20 years, mass communication researchers have maintained that television functions amid a variety of environmental influences all of which act in varying combinations to produce a wide range of effects within the viewers. Most television viewing by children, for example, occurs within a family setting. The impact of television viewing by the child needs to be understood within this environment. The current and continuing interest in television and the child has highlighted the limited scope of the research that has been conducted on the child and family viewing (see, for example, Hess and Goldman, 1962; Greenberg and Dominick, 1968; Barcus, 1969; and Chafee, McLeod and Atkin, 1971). Research in the area has been determined as a critical need (Comstock, 1975), but little actual activity has been recorded. One reason for the lack of activity is that the traditional research approaches do not well fit the study of process variables with the actual contexts of their enactments.

This paper is an initial report of an on-going program of research being conducted within the Departments of Communication at the Universities of Hartford, Texas and Utah on the role of television within the social setting of the family. This program of study makes use of ethnological methods for the study of behavior within naturalistic environments. This report presents some of the central arguments concerning the use of ethnomethods and provides specific guidelines for the conduct of such studies.

ETHNOLOGY--THE ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR

The arguments in favor of ethnological approaches typically begin

with a review of the limits of the hypothetic-deductive approaches. These positivistic approaches seek to abstract from the process of behavior discrete variables whose existence can be generalized beyond the process itself. That is, they seek to isolate variables that are independent with characteristics that can be predetermined and manipulated. These variables become the patterns by which the stuff of life is interpreted. For ethnomethodologists, these variables are limited because people do not relate to each other with the positivistic rationality of the scientist. Soloski and Daly comment further:

> The complexities of interaction within human group life are likely to be masked and obfuscated by these variables. The irony is that the attractiveness of varibale analysis--discrete, clear-cut, and unitary variables with their ease of manipulation--leads to a glossing over of what is really going on in human group life (Soloski and Daly, 1977:2).

Further difficulties are identified with hypothetic designs which manipulate conditions to produce the optimal circumstances for the evocation of a particular response--the measured response. These designs, at most tell us only that given responses can occur, but fail to provide information as to the actual effects that do occur in vivo. Anderson, Meyer and Donohue (in press) note that traditional research designs while indicating the pre-requisite conditions for the behavior to appear, fail to specify "the likelihood that those conditions will be present in the environment when the message appears and the proportion of the audience likely to be affected by these conditions at the appropriate time." These researchers conclude that we may be concerning ourselves with behavioral consequences which have no probability of occurring in naturalistic settings.

Hypothetic designs also have been criticized because their narrow

focus ignores a significant portion of the event. Blumer observes:

> The conventional procedure is to identify something which is presumed to operate on group life and treat it as an independent variable and then to select some form of group activity as the dependent variable. The independent variable is put at the beginning part of the process, and the dependent variable at the terminal part of the process. The intervening process is ignored or, what amounts to the same thing, taken for granted as something that need not be considered . . . . Where process is recognized, its study is regarded as a problem that is independent of the relation between variables (Blumer, 1972:97-98).

Ethnology, the generic term applied to studies that make use of process methodologies, is seen as an answer for these hypothetic, positivistic ills. Ethnology has a wide and varied following in the social sciences. It is the case study of Economics and Management; the life space interview of sociology; the experience interview of Social Psychology; and the ethnograph of Anthropology. Garfinkel in defining it, appropriately, describes its process:

> We are concerned with how society gets put together; the how it is getting done; the how to do it; the social structure of everyday activities. I would say we are doing studies of how persons, as parties to ordinary arrangements, use the features of the arrangement to make for members the visibly organized characteristics happen (Garfinkel, 1968:12).

The ethnological approach has been identified as a particularly useful "method for stimulating insights and suggesting hypotheses for research (Sellitz, 1976:99)." Bennis states that it is the only method which can explicate the "process by which outcomes result from inputs" (Bennis, 1968:231). Walton, in a discussion of the advantages and attributes of the case study, writes: "The case study, if employed appropriately by applied behavioral scientists, becomes an excellent vehicle for the inductive development of new theory--middle-range

theory--that has both goodness of fit with the phenomenon contemplated and implications for actions" (Walton, 1972:74).

Returning to the specific subject matter of this program of research, media consumption is a pheromenon unique to each individual. People use the media for their own ends and by their own rules. Traditional mass communication research has, generally, failed to recognize media use as an ongoing function. Existing measures single out minute acts rather than identify the interplay of the many elements that compose media usage. Media usage is not a discrete event and does not lend itself well to categorization or global generalization. But mass media are an integral part of our social system. Manipulation of these media contributes to many aspects of the human interaction process. As Lull comments:

> Television and other mass media, rarely mentioned as vital sources in the construction or maintenance of interpersonal relations, can be seen to play a central role in the methods which families and other social units employ purposefully to interact within their own special everyday realities (Lull, 1978:5).

Lull further suggests that people tend to maximize control of their environments and, consequently, that people use the media to organize and control their lives. If accurate, this notion provides a new perspective for the researcher interested in isolating clear-cut examples of the organizing process inherent within human behavior. Manifestations of this organizing process would be apparent to an ethnological approach.

ETHNOLOGY--THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST

Few arguments are advanced against the study of culture-bound events in their natural settings (ethnology); many arguments are

presented against the ideology of Ethnomethodologists' claim that their scientific product is less tainted with definitional bias, value judgment and the like. In short, they claim that their product is closer to primitive reality and less a theoretical artifact. Bauman puts it "The real worry is the ethnomethodologists flat and unflinching renunciation of the very possibility of anyone else accounting meaningfully for 'objective reality' . . . ." (Bauman, 1973:18). And Gordon states:

> For ethnomethodologists there exist a truth and a reality in what people do in their common experience. The difficulty of this approach is that the truth (reality) does not exist in itself. There does not exist a reality but a reality problem--precisely because realities (truth) inhere within an ideology, which itself emerges as a dialectical relationship between social consciousness and social being (Gordon, 1976:201).

For Gordon (and for the present authors) truth and reality emerge from the conceptual framework used. Ethnomethods produce a framework which is a reality not the reality. The value of that framework, of course, lies in its utility for some purpose. As Gedlow writes:

> Like any methodology in the social sciences, ethnomethodology must demonstrate its usefulness or payoff, before its promoters can expect it to be accepted by the sociological community. Since it appears that in practice, ethnomethodology uses little more than a glorified participant-observation technique, it is subject to the same set of criticisms as the latter, and has similar limitations on its usefulness (Gedlow, 1972:398).

Gedlow's "criterion of practicality" leads us to a second area of contention--the value of the product produced. The ethnographic approach is clearly open to the criticism that the cases developed lack generalizability. Brewer states, "By itself, the study of a

single case can do little to specify . . . internal process" (Brewer, 1971:476). Since the specification of internal processes are for Brewer the path to prediction the critique is substantial. Anderson and Meyer (showing their ability to argue any side of an issue) criticize process or systems research calling it "snapshot" research. It may give us a picture of some past operation, but like a snapshot it makes no necessary statement about the present; worse still, future behavior can only be 'guessed at' . . . ." (Anderson and Meyer, 1975:422).

Beyond the unsolvable ideological issues, the methods of ethnomethods have come in for criticism. Chief among these is the perceived obtrusiveness of the researcher when entering the social setting. Clearly, the presence of the observer modifies the event being observed. The objection is somewhat of a herring, because no measurement process can claim to be free of this problem. Conceptually the assumption is made that although individual family members are now functioning within a socially modified environment, the strong, habitual, familial social structures involving television use will continue to function or quickly be re-established. This research team has now conducted three family studies and is of the opinion that major structural changes do not occur. Our evidence comes from self-reports of the family members and measures collected before the observation period began.

Finally there is the objection that the ethnograph--the written narrative--is essentially dependent on the creative capacities of the writer not on the process it attempts to describe. This criticism is

particularly nettlesome. A later section of this paper presents an approach designed in response to it.

ETHNOLOGY--A RECONCILIATION OF ARGUMENTS

The present authors find the notions that one conceptual framework is inherently superior over another philosophically repugnant. Different conceptualizations show differing utilities for given purposes. The ideological battles over what method can best represent "objective reality" have little merit. The issues disappear by rendering problematic the outcomes desired from scientific endeavor. In doing so, methods become tools toward given ends rather than ideological precepts. Which in turn, calls on the scientist to produce more than a knee jerk reaction when selecting an approach. Glaser and Strauss write:

> There is no fundamental clash between the purposes and capacities of qualitative and quantitative methods or data. What clash there is concerns the primacy of emphasis on verification or generation of theory--to which heated discussions on qualitative versus quantitative data have been linked historically. Primacy depends only on the circumstances of research, on the interests and training of the researcher, and on the kinds of material he needs for his theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:17-18).

It would appear that a particularly useful approach would combine the inductive models of ethnology and the deductive models of hypothetic studies. Each can be pursued over the same individuals in the course of a single study. Each has its peculiar limitations, but these limitations appear in different areas and are not additive. Consequently, the strengths of ethnology complement the weakness of quantitative approaches and vice versa.

It cannot be overemphasized that the case studies per se represent an invaluable resource. Because they provide directly translatable descriptions of the uses and consequences of televiewing in a normal environment a good portion of the information is directly usable by scientists in the development of subsequent hypotheses. The next part of this paper presents the procedure by which qualitative and quantitative approaches are married in an ethnological study of the role of television in familial settings.

PROCEDURES: TOTAL PROGRAM OF RESEARCH

This program of research is directed toward two goals: (a) the development of a library of case studies relating the process of television use within a family setting and (b) the interogation of these case studies for communalities and covering statements which can be predictive of certain classes of outcomes of televiewing by individuals. Ethnological studies do not proceed along the steps of a deductive model (e. g. proceeding from theory to hypotheses to data collection). They are better represented by an immersion of the researcher into a functioning environment. Nevertheless, this immersion takes place in recognizable steps. These are: (1) The statement of the goals in terms of the relationships to be studied and described; (2) the determination of the minimal variables to be collected; (3) the development of the outline and form of the final case; (4) the performance of a schedule of contacts; (5) the elemental or variable-by-variable write-up; (6) the integrative write-up; (7) the final draft of the case; (8) the analysis of the descriptive communalities across cases within subject groups; (9) the analysis of communalities

and differences across varying subject groups; and (10) theoretic implications.

As of this writing the research team has completed the first three steps and is working through the next three with a schedule of families. In the next few sections we will consider the decisions made in implementing those steps and the problems of implementing the remaining four.

PROCEDURES: DIRECTIVE GOALS

Three major classes of variables were of interest: (1) Normative and baseline data on television within the family structure; (2) television as an agent of consumer socialization; and (3) television's role in affecting family members' values. Each variable is to be studied across each family member (adult and child) individually and within the family interaction. In this manner, characteristic data of the quantitative type and process data of an ethnological character is generated.

Ethnological Outcomes

From the ethnological data the following outcomes were established:

(1) A description of the circumstances of television use by individual family members as observed and as reported in survey instruments.

(2) A description of the "functions" of television within the family structure.

(3) An interpretive description of the motives, purposes and consequences of televiewing as observed and as self-reported.

(4) An interpretive description of television as an agent of consumer socialization.

(5) An interpretive description of television as an agent in value formation.

The phrase "interpretive description" is used to identify those descriptive narratives in which characteristic data have been used to "interpret" observed occurrences. For example, in one project family, the 12-year old daughter, polite, tentative, a successful student but given to daydreaming, made a specific effort, as reported in her viewing diary and as observed during the four week observation period, to view alone programs which involved characters of her age and sex (Eight is Enough, One Day at a Time, etc.). She reported those programs as her favorite and that she learned social information from them. In the interpretive write-ups characteristic data on personality, cognitive and moral development, peer relationships and so forth can be brought to bear to answer more fully, such questions as why those programs are her favorites, why the consistent choice to view alone, and whether those circumstances heighten the impact of the programs as information and value agents. Validation (or disconfirmation) of these interpretive descriptions is accomplished through subsequent observation or data collection. (This validating process is described in a later section.)

Statistical Outcomes

Standard quantitative data collection instruments are administered independently to each family member. Therefore, the more traditional quantitative/deductive approach can be used. This approach makes use of multivariate statistical analysis to test hypotheses drawn from the literature and to refine hypotheses developed from the analysis

of the case studies. The outline below presents the independent and dependent variables of the multivariate analysis.

Independent Variables

I. Viewing Behaviors
   a. Time/frequency
   b. Content
   c. Purpose
   d. Intensity

II. Reported Uses of Television in Subsequent Behavior

III. Availability of Alternatives to TV Viewing

IV. Psychographic
   a. California Personality Inventory
   b. Detroit Test of Learning Aptitude
   c. Piagetian tests of cognitive development
   d. Kohleberg/Rest tests of moral development

V. Demographic
   a. Age
   b. Education
   c. Household Income
   d. Sex of respondent
   e. Socio-economic status
   f. Minority group membership
   g. Religious preference

Dependent Variables

I. Consumer Behavior
   a. Product knowledge
   b. Commercial content knowledge
   c. Attitudes toward commercial's
   d. Purchase behavior

II. Consumer Socialization
   a. Awareness of advertiser's intent
   b. Perception of life style orientation
   c. Perception of sex and occupational roles
   d. Identification of consumer needs and desires

III. Value structure
   a. Use of aggression
   b. "Common ethics"
   c. Status
   d. Attributes of "good life"

PROCEDURES: MINIMAL VARIABLES SET

A minimal variable set was established to provide a common foundation across all case narratives. This set contains the least number of variables under consideration. They have been identified by the research team as essential for an ethnological study of family tele-viewing. These variables are elements contained within the family

media setting which contribute to the "point" of television. These elements are not exclusive or exhaustive but provide parameters for the project. A panoramic outline follows:

I. Normative and Baseline Data on Television Within the Family Structure

A. Physical setting (floor plan, traffic patterns, set location, etc.

B. Articulated and covert rules and structure for set use

C. Viewing behaviors and program preferences

D. Attention levels for program and non-program material

E. Available behavioral alternatives

F. Work, school, and/or peer related viewing

G. Individual and familial uses of television and other media

H. Psycho/demographics (age, education, sex, developmental state, socio-economic status, etc.)

II. Television as an Agent of Consumer Socialization

A. Inventory of consumer skills (knowledge of products, criteria of selection, expectations for products, etc.)

B. Inventory of recent acquisitions and basis of purchase

C. Inventory of individual resources and expenditures

D. Awareness of and expectations for products by developmental state

E. Individual recognition and degree of awareness of commercials as product information source, social value source, social role source, all by developmental state

F. Comparison of social roles and values as presented by

commercials and as held by family members

III. Television as a Value Agent

A. Inventory of individually and commonly held values by developmental state

B. Individual recognition and degree of awareness of television programming as value agent by development state

C. Individual perception of the utility of televised content in value or ethical problem areas

D. Individual assignment of solutions to hypothetical value or ethical problems as appropriate to television characters, family members and other value sources within four areas: aggression, "common ethics," status and attributes of "good life"

E. Comparisons of parental, child, and sibling value structures, coaxial perceptions of value structures, value feedback links and value sources

The choice of variables, establishes the presuppositions that the research team "carries with itself" into the participant observation condition. They are the underlying cognitions through which the observations will be interpreted. Some ethnomethods practitioners claim an attitude of "pure objectivity" in the observation process. The present research team considers such claims cognitively impossible and prefers to bring the basic assumptions "up front" for evaluation.

These variables generate relational questions of interest. These questions direct the observations and data collection. The answers to these questions represent the lower bound outcome of the descriptions

and analysis. The list of questions is too lengthy for the scope of this paper, but two examples might be illustrative. In proxemics, one example is the relationship between set placement and family use. Family use can take a number of characteristics, solitary viewing, communal viewing, child only, adult only, child and adult and so on. There is an interaction among family use, available space, the use of that space, furniture arrangement and so on. The particular arrangements, the design as a compromise-between-competing-motives, the satisfactions and dissatisfactions expressed by various family members with proxemical elements all become observational mileposts in the investigation of that question. One project family had designed their own home with all social areas (living room, family room, dining room) on a single level. The adults in the family expressed dissatisfaction with the arrangement because they were unable to separate themselves from the children when the children were viewing television. They commented that the design has substantially increased their viewing as compared with their previous house where the family room and the television set was on an isolated lower level. This change which had sensitized the adults to their own viewing habits provided an excellent opportunity for a more thorough explication of viewing behaviors which might have otherwise been missed.

A second example is in the daily activity which identify the available behavioral alternatives and indicate the times each family member is available for televiewing. A question which follows is whether there is a pattern among the individuals taken as a family unit. A pattern that emerged in two project families was the

reservation of particular times for communal viewing.

PROCEDURES: DEVELOPMENT OF CASE NARRATIVE FORMAT

After the variable list had been established, the research team selected a volunteer family and conducted an observation using three independent observers concurrently. The intent was to investigate whether the variable list would provide a sufficient base for the common analysis of the three narrative which would result. Examination of the three narratives indicated that the creative factor mentioned previously under criticisms substantially limited cross-referencing of events. On the other hand categorical schemes which would guarantee common elements were antithetical to the process observation approach. The problem was resolved by a compromise in which the relational questions became the responsibility of all observers and the observations/narrative writing was divided into two parts each having two steps.

We first established the minimal variable set and the lower bound outcome questions which were to be the common entry points for all observation. The initial observation phase followed. Although directed by the pre-selected variables and questions these observations were open-ended in the sense that no particular behavioral response to the variables and/or questions was presupposed and observations were not limited to either list. The write-up of these initial observations was first done variable by variable, question by question (the elemental write-up) and then in an integrative form of exposition.

These narratives formed the first step in the second part of

the case study format. The narratives, then, became the presumptions under which the second observational phase would be conducted. The narratives were "disassembled" for their separate, substantive statements about televiewing in a family setting. These statements were treated as hypothetical, relational statements whose investigation was a lower-bound outcome of the second set of observations. Decision criteria for the confirmation of each statement were also established at this time. These criteria specified expected results in characteristic data, the need for additional data collection and even field experimentation or the manipulation of respondents. The final step was the confirmational phase of observation and data collection. Figure 1 shows the four step process used in the development of the case study.

A specific example of this process might be in order. In family number 3, under the variable heading of Rules and Control of Set Use, the initial narrative reported the adults as having specific rules on censoring shows with high sexual content for their children. The children on the other hand tended to report these shows as favorites. Specific statements were made in the narrative describing the conditions observed when the rules were enforced and not enforced. One statement indicated that the rule was more likely to be enforced by the father particularly when he felt the content might lead to questions from his viewing daughters. This became a directing hypothesis for the second phase of observation and specific criteria were established for its confirmation. One criterion revolved around the notion that the father would be more likely to exercise the rule in

the presence of the older daughters. Another postulated that the father would express a feeling of discomfort or embarrassment when describing his feelings about viewing that content with his daughters. Subsequent evaluation of the criteria that were met and those that failed will permit the observer/narrative writer to sharpen and augment his exposition of the observed rule.

Case Study Review

When the observer completes the confirmation phase of observations and data collection, the two sets of observations and the preliminary, variable-by-variable write-up are combined in the final integrative case study. This study is then subject to review by another observer/writer. This person operates in the same manner as a good editor. She looks for clarity of expression and for completeness of the exposition. Problems with expression are, of course, referred to a re-write. Incompleteness requires a review of the four-step procedure to determine sources of the problem. For example, the initial variable set or the set of relational questions may have to be expanded or refined. The observation procedures may have to be changed in terms of timing, duration, etc. This reflexive process insures continuity across observers and a continual refinement of technique.

Reliability and Validity

Ethnological studies are particularly susceptible to criticism in terms of the reliability of the data collected. There are a number of reasons for this liability: The processes observed are sufficiently complex to permit multiple interpretations; the researcher has no guide as to which part of the behavioral cycle is being examined and,

thus, consistency of behavior is impossible to judge as the observation is over an arbitrary length of time; there are no simple computer procedures to apply. Our answer to this difficulty is to provide internal reliability for the case studies developed. The procedural techniques of data collection have been structured so as to be able to invest more credibility in phenomena confirmed from multiple sources. Techniques have been built into the various data collection devices to examine family behavior from more than one instance or utterance. The several variables under consideration are probed through three "windows," interviews, survey instruments, and observations. Confidence in the narrative statements depends on the number of ways a given phenomenon is presented to the researcher. The approach is not to determine whether any particular observation meets some arbitrary statistical standard of reliability; it is to provide an increasingly accurate approximation of the process under study through the application of a sequence of measures in an exploratory/confirmatory approach.

PROBLEMS TO COME

This project has reached the iterative stage of case study development. While a number of difficulties have been developed at least two additional problems can be clearly foreseen. First, the process of developing the library of cases will cover an extended period of time and involve a substantial turn-over in personnel. Management will be a clear difficulty.

Second, once a sufficient number of cases have been developed the intent is to subject these cases to analysis for communalities within

and across subject groups. We hope to develop inductive group models which will compare with the statistical models developed from the multi-variate analysis. The prime difficulty will be the reconciliation of conflicting statements from the two approaches. Certain of the conflicts will be substantive; others artifactual; others due to irreconcilable differences in perspective. As of this writing we are unsure of the identifying marks of each and the procedures to implement. Because it has not been done before, the final outcome is unknown.

CONCLUSION

This program of study has attempted to lay out ethnological procedures which are reflexive and self-correcting. The results of these procedures will be, first of all, a continually expanding library of case studies about families and television. This library should provide a valuable resource for scientists and policy makers alike.

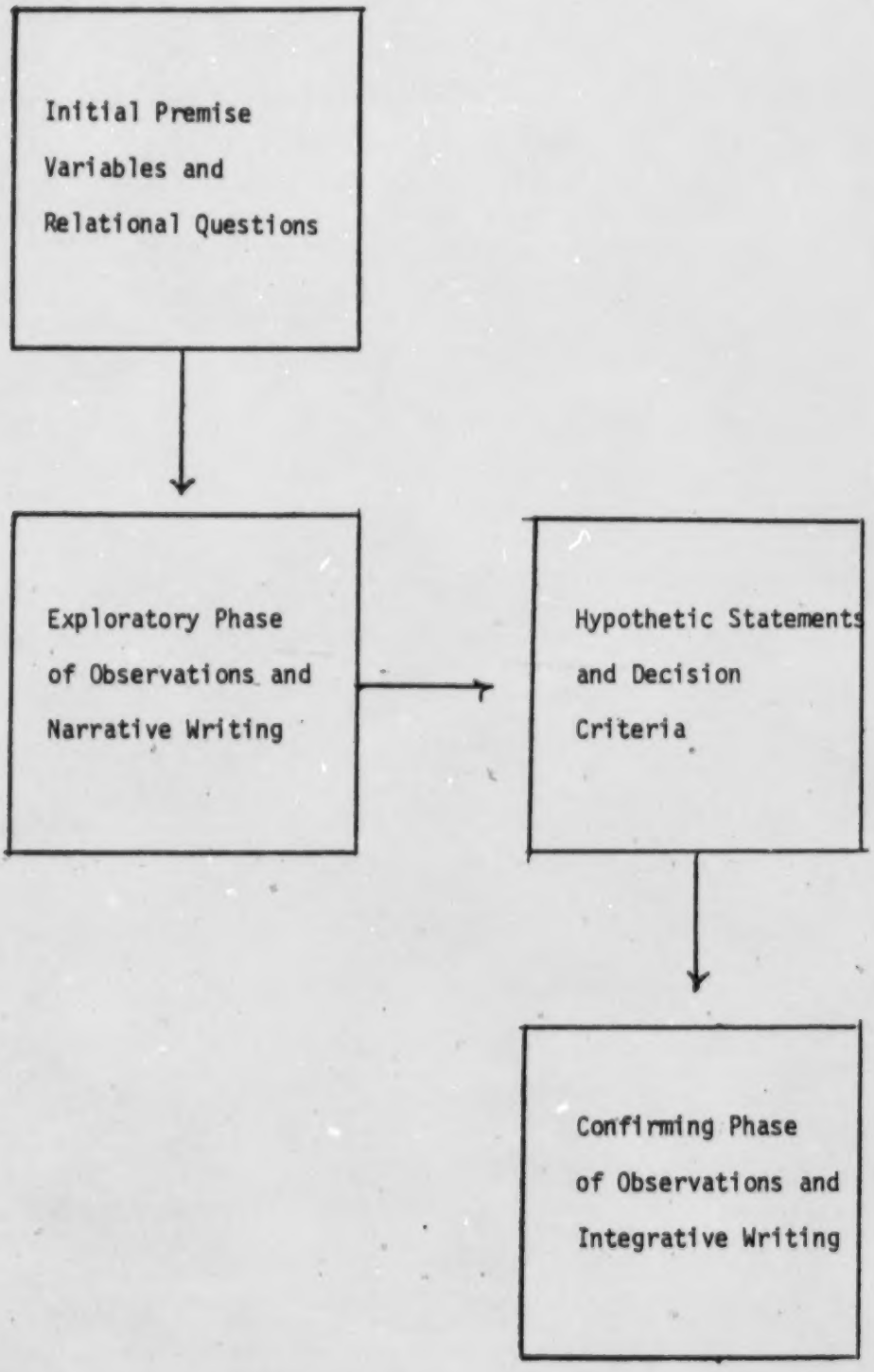

Figure 1--Description of 4 step exploratory and confirming observation process.

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